

He wrote 21 books on Ghalib among other laurels to his name. Sadly, Kalidas Gupta died just hours before he was to receive the Padmashri

When Riza died, Ghalib lost his Resurrection Man

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THE fourth floor flat in Jaldarshan building at Napeansea Road is a bibliophile's paradise. Thousands of tomes — modern and post-modern titles jostle for space behind glass cases. Among them is one in Urdu, *Deewan-e-Ghalib Kaamil* (Ghalib's Complete Collection), waiting for its author, Kalidas Gupta 'Riza' to leaf through it once more. He won't. The celebrated Urdu poet left for his heavenly abode on March 21 in New Delhi, a few hours before he was to receive the Padmashri at age 75.

"We didn't know he would go like this," says wife Savitri, tears welling in her eyes. While Savitri, son Vimal, and daughter Rita have lost an anchor, Urdu has lost one of its crusaders. And the 19th century poet Mirza Ghalib his resurrection

man.

Ghalib, the subject of endless debate and discussion among critics, had found an avowed admirer in Riza. He has Ghalib's entire collection of couplets between the covers of *Deewan-e-Ghalib Kaamil*. Of the 60 books Riza wrote, 21 are on Ghalib, his poetry and personality. Says poet and critic Shamim Tariq: "Riza had an unusual affair with Ghalib. If there is one book that will keep him alive, it is *Deewan-e-Ghalib Kaamil*. I have not come across another person so passionate about the poet."

Born in Jalandhar in Punjab, Riza imbibed the love for Urdu poetry from the poet-saint Pandit Labhuram Josh Malsiyani, a disciple of poet Dagh Dehlvi. It could

therefore be said that Riza belonged to the Dagh School of Urdu poetry. Yet he wrote so extensively on Ghalib. Poet and editor of the Urdu daily *Inquilab*, Fuzail Jaafari, says: "I once asked Riza how he became an expert of *Ghalibyaat* (Ghalib's writings) since he belonged to the Dagh school. He sim-

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Kalidas Gupta Riza



The cover of *Deewan-e-Ghalib Kaamil*

ply laughed and changed the subject."

Taking criticism in his stride, Riza carried on but no one was more critical than his wife. "Once engrossed in his work, he would forget everything else. And I would jokingly say that Ghalib died but created a problem for us," remi-

niscs Savitri. Hailing from a trader's family, Riza fell in love with Urdu quite early. He earned this love wherever he went. So when he moved to Mombasa in South Africa and started his own enterprise in the 1950s, Riza still managed to organise *mushairas* and *mehfils*. When he returned to India and settled in Bombay in the 1970s, his biggest regret was that he had to leave about 7,000 books behind! "He loved books like one loves one's life," remembers Tariq. "He would get 10 to 15 books for reviews and commentaries every day. When the house feel short of space, we dumped a few thousand in the garage downstairs," says son Vimal.

Besides writing on Ghalib, Riza worked on some non-Muslim Urdu poets as well. His book on Pandit Brij Narayan Chakbast, a nationalist poet in the 1940s, is a milestone. He was working on Firaq Gorakhpuri when he died. A

perfectionist, Razi often complained about the lack of depth in young poets and writers. "Whenever a badly written book came for review, he would get irritated. However, he would generously write good reviews and forewords, even though the books lacked in merit," Savitri recalls.

Riza never had an intellectual's ego. Writer and critic Yusuf Nazim says: "Whenever I had any difficulty understanding a couplet or its context, I would call him up, assured of a satisfactory answer." There were many others, including late poets Sardar Jafri and Majrooh Sultanpuri, who turned to him in times of crisis. "Since Riza was a scholar of Persian as well, Jafri and Sultanpuri would often ask him to explain Persian couplets," says Tariq, adding that apart from Ghalib and the Urdu language, Mumbai has lost a literary giant. And a reference point.